

African Cities and the Development Conundrum: Actors and Agency in the Urban Grey Zone

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Abstract

Africa is urbanising faster than any other continent. The stupendous pace of urbanisation challenges the usual image of Africa as a rural continent. The sheer complexity of African cities contests conventional understandings of the urban as well as standard development policies. Lingerings between chaos and creativity, Western images of African cities seem unable to serve as a basis for development policies. The diversity of African cities is hard to conceptualise—but at the same time, unbiased views of the urban are the first step to addressing the urban development conundrum. International development cooperation should not only make African cities a focus of its engagement—it should also be cautious not to build its interventions on concepts inherited from Western history, such as the formal/informal dichotomy. We argue that African cities are more appropriately regarded as urban grey zones that only take shape and become colourful through the actors' agency and practice. The chapters of this special issue offer a fresh look at African cities, and the many opportunities as well as limitations that emerge for African urbanites—state officials, planners, entrepreneurs, development agencies and ordinary people—from their own point of view: they ask where, for whom and why such limitations and opportunities emerge, how they change over time and how African urban dwellers actively enliven and shape their cities.

1 The Urban Challenge in Africa

Cities produce difference—and they accommodate difference. African cities are no exception. They rather seem to accelerate processes of differentiation to a degree that makes it difficult to conceive them as an entity, to understand their social complexities and, not least, to govern them. The pace of urbanisation in Africa currently exceeds that of all other continents. Soon, more Africans will live in cities than in rural areas. As reliable statistics are hard to establish, estimations vary, but 2030 seems to be a safe bet for the turning point (UN DESA, 2014; UN-Habitat, 2008, 2016; ADB, 2016a; also Chapter 6, this issue).

Other estimates claim that the watershed could already be reached by 2022—a mere blink of an eye from a historical perspective.¹ To some extent, this incredible acceleration is due to the belated beginning of mass urbanisation in Africa (see below).² But besides its historical framework, urbanisation in Africa today presents multiple challenges, which—regardless of its inherent problems—also find expression in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number 11, from the UN (2015). African urbanism is a challenge for our scholarly understanding of social change, the status of such cities and what they are about to become, and of their role in national, regional and world development, and last but not least, contemporary African cities raise questions of how they can be governed and planned. As conventional forms of governance often fail, new, ‘...hybrid institutional forms have to be developed’ (Smit and Pieterse, 2014, 160). African cities thus challenge conventional concepts of development and social theory. Mario Pezzini, director of the OECD development centre, says that ‘it is not possible to separate these issues’ (*The Guardian*, 2016; ADB, 2016b, 143–189). Social theory and development practice have to be thought of as one.

Cities and their relationship with their hinterland must be understood in their full complexity—else all attempts to govern them will fail. Hence the significance of the urban and urban studies for the national, regional and eventually global future (Pieterse, 2008; Parnell and Pieterse, 2014). Very much the same holds true for development agendas. Ignoring the urban dimension would mean conceiving the future without one of its most important, if not the most important of its dimensions. Cities can drive development by providing education, work and consumption opportunities. At the same time, they can also drain their hinterland by drawing resources into the exploding African megacities: rural areas lose their best minds as they move into cities—very much as the global North attracts the best brains.

For many, cities are at the centre of a new world geography (Robinson, 2005). They are also the sites where new social theories have to prove whether and how they can be translated into policies that advance the lives of ordinary people. Without thorough, empirically based and theoretically informed

1 Comparing estimations over the past two decades shows how volatile estimations are (e.g. Kessides, 2006; Potts, 2012; and Chénal, 2016; also Chapter 6, this issue).

2 It took Europe 110 years to move from 15 per cent urban dwellers in 1800 to 40 per cent in 1910. Well into the twentieth century, urbanisation was mainly a phenomenon of the industrialised global North. But in 2013, a little more than a hundred years later, six of the ten countries with the highest urbanisation rates in the world are in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2014). In Africa, 14 per cent of the population lived in cities in 1950, and in 2010, 60 years later, the percentage was estimated to be 48 per cent—roughly twice the nineteenth and early twentieth century growth rates of urbanisation in Europe (ADB, 2012).

knowledge, we might only address the symptoms and ignore the real problems. One of the targets of SDG 11 is to ensure access to basic services and housing for all urbanites by 2030 (UN, 2015). However, it is ‘...surprisingly difficult to secure accurate data of access to basic services in rural and urban areas in African countries’ (Pieterse and Parnell, 2014, 11). Again, there is a need for much more empirical research and theoretical reflection on African cities. Admittedly, this collection cannot fill that gap—but it contributes to rethinking African cities by raising key questions that need answers. How the urban revolution in Africa is handled will depend on how well it is understood and how—besides the political participation of the populace (Smit and Pieterse, 2014; Oldfield, 2015)—the continent’s intellectuals will be able to engage in this debate (Pieterse and Parnell, 2014; Watson, 2014; Oldfield, 2015). We would gamble with our shared future—not only with that of the estimated half a billion Africans who currently live in these cities—if we did not engage with these issues (UN DESA, 2014; Datta and Shaban, 2016).

Writings on urbanisation in Africa tend to be normative; many views are either overly optimistic or pessimistic while balanced perspectives seem to be the exception. One strand of literature over-romanticises the African city. This focus stresses the innovative potential, the creativity and the entrepreneurial attitudes of African urbanites. It considers the African city as a particularly vital space from where, for example, a huge variety of artistic expressions emerge (Pinther et al., 2012). The other strand, in contrast, focuses on what African cities lack compared to metropolitan areas in the global North and accordingly develops a crisis narrative by depicting African cities as not working—while claiming at the same time that urbanisation is a prerequisite for development. For authors like Mike Davis (2006), the bustling cities in the global South consist mainly of chaotic slums where poverty, frustration, corruption, crime and violence thrive due to a lack of housing and basic infrastructure and to the limited opportunities they offer their inhabitants. This Afro-pessimistic doomsday scenario depicts African cities primarily as violent and ungovernable and eventually as a mirror of the whole continent.

African cities and their inhabitants do face numerous challenges (see UN, 2015). However, to understand cities and urbanisation in Africa, normative approaches will neither work as heuristic instruments nor produce the insights needed to advance urban development. At best, they may highlight a particular perspective, but they will also restrict the spectators’ view to that one aspect—namely, that cities in Africa fail to meet expectations based on the historical experience of Western urbanisation. In this issue, we thus look for the many opportunities as well as limitations that exist for African urban dwellers from their own point of view. We ask where, for whom and why such limitations and

opportunities emerge and how they change over time (Pieterse, 2008; Chapter 2, this issue). By acknowledging the prevalent tension between invention and intervention (Obrist et al., 2013) and applying an actor-centred approach that analyses the wide range of urban practices, we aim at moving beyond a simplistic discourse of modernity and development. Therefore, we focus on how various actors bargain, manoeuvre, resist, mediate and flexibly adapt their everyday lives in an ever-changing African urban environment (Chapters 11 and 13, this issue).

African cities are 'works in progress' (Simone, 2004a, 1); they are fluid, complex, and marked by a huge breadth, diversity and heterogeneity—both across and within cities. What is more, cities in Africa are not exceptional and are as ordinary as any (Robinson, 2006). They are confronted with many problems such as vulnerability, poverty and inequality and are characterised by a constant competition over resources (Kennedy, 2015) and the making and control of urban spaces (Massey, 2005; Healey, 2007) just like many other urban areas all over the world (Myers, 2011). But they also produce that specific urban mixture: the connections and disconnections that breed new ideas and opportunities (Amin and Thrift, 2002, 3).

Edgar Pieterse and Susan Parnell (2014) point to some commonalities that might be typical features of African cities; namely, a) rapid urbanisation (Chapters 6 and 10, this issue); b) the strong link between the rural and the urban due to circular migration patterns (Chapter 13, this issue); c) large peri-urban areas that characterise the cities' outskirts (Chapters 10 and 11, this issue); d) the informality of urbanisation that affects the economic and the social sphere (Chapters 9 and 11, this issue); e) urban primacy, a particularity rooted in the colonial past due to which many countries have one large urban centre typically three to four times larger than the second largest city; f) rivalling and partly overlapping power poles (Chapter 13, this issue) that make it difficult for ordinary citizens to know whom they should address to achieve certain goals; g) land and housing as major issues due to unclear legal situations; h) huge inequality between cities' inhabitants, which results in almost no interactions between the urban elite (Chapter 12, this issue) and poor citizens; and finally j) urban youth constitutes a particularly vulnerable large cohort in many African cities (Pieterse and Parnell, 2014, 9–15; Chapter 11, this issue).

The current state of urbanisation in Africa has its roots in the history of the continent. It is no less related to the present economic, social and political settings that African cities have to cope with. A fundamental and still influential characteristic is the comparatively short history of urbanisation on the African continent. A handful of bigger towns had emerged in medieval West Africa, and smaller urban areas persisted there through the first part of the nineteenth

century, while eastern and southern Africa stayed mostly rural, with the exception of a few scattered Swahili trading towns (Iliffe, 1995, 118). The situation did not change much when the continent came under colonial domination by the end of the century. Throughout the incipient phase of the colonial era, the African continent remained mostly rural, intermingled with some small but growing colonial trading towns along the coasts. At that time, only Cairo had more than 900,000 inhabitants. Ibadan, Tunis and Johannesburg, which followed next, counted between 100,000 and 210,000 residents each. This picture changed rapidly after World War II when urban areas began to expand at an unprecedented pace. Between 1940 and 1960, the population of many African cities more than doubled. Simultaneously, new cities emerged, for instance the mining towns of the Copperbelt (Chapter 13, this issue). However, other towns also shrank when the colonial powers withdrew or because caravan routes became less important (Freund, 2007, 65–67).

In the postcolonial era, the pace of urbanisation accelerated enormously because of the rural–urban migration that drew masses of peasants to cities that were increasingly unable to absorb them. By the end of the millennium, large African cities like Lagos, Cairo or Kinshasa had become endless urban agglomerations of over five million people (Freund, 2007, 143–145; Burdett and Sudjic, 2007). Nevertheless, Europeans perceived and often continue to perceive Africa as a rural continent; and so did development cooperation well into the twenty-first century, where the image of rural Africa remained the basis for development aid and later development cooperation. The reduction of poverty in Africa was thought of, conceived and planned as technical cooperation in rural areas, largely ignoring the urban realities of the continent.³ For a long time, applied research and development policies focused on agrarian and pastoral issues. Thus, many programmes assisted and still support African farmers to increase their harvest, to promote sustainable land management and to develop strategies to deal with climate change. The aim of many governments—supported by international development agencies—was to reduce circular rural–urban migration patterns. We do not claim that such programmes are irrelevant.⁴ However, we advocate readjusting the focus away from the rural to

3 Michael Lipton (1977) popularised the term ‘urban bias’ in development since the late 1970s. He claimed that development cooperation focused almost exclusively on cities and neglected rural areas—a misjudgement that has had an enormous and devastating influence (e.g. Riddell, 1985).

4 The interdependence of local subsistence and cash crop production with international value chains has been a central theme of economic anthropology since the 1960s (e.g. Meillassoux, 1981). International development agencies recently rediscovered this link but framed it—unlike the critical studies of the 1960s and 1970s—no longer in terms of rural dependency but

Africa's urban areas as sooner rather than later, this is where the majority of the continent's population will live.

As recently as 2007, political scientist Goran Hyden wrote: 'After 40 or more years of trying to assist sub-Saharan Africa to develop and modernize, the region remains an enigma to the international policy community. [...] The proverbial elephant has been examined from all possible angles with only a minimal discovery of what really works in Africa. The main reason is that the international development community has been reluctant to learn what the elephant is all about when up close' (Hyden, 2007, 16751). We share his view and believe that urban Africa is part of that elephant sitting squarely in the room. There is an urgent need to engage more in basic as well as applied research on African cities—and to look at them as ordinary cities facing ordinary problems. Thus, we need to thoroughly understand how local actors live and engage in African cities. Most of the contributions to this issue mirror this shift in development studies and put local actors and their agency first.

From a foreign, in particular Northerners' perspective, the ordinary, 'normal' African city is an informal city. While the former colonial centre often turned into a business district with metallised window panes, the areas where the local population lived soon transformed into mushrooming neighbourhoods that no planning could keep up with. Behind the restricted zones once meant to protect the white colonisers and later the privileged state bourgeoisie, shanty towns extended in all directions. As early as in the 1920s, the colonisers perceived these 'spontaneous settlements' as a challenge to their visions of an emerging urban Africa (Njoh, 2009). Well-organised towns were supposed to serve as showcases for the attempts of Western powers to order African societies. In new political contexts, such ambitions to some extent continued to inform development policies—including those of the UN, whose target is to upgrade slums and provide safe and affordable housing for all by 2030 (UN, 2015), the new donor countries as well as postcolonial administrations (Jones, 2012a). 'Slum upgrading' is only the most obvious intervention in areas that are usually considered 'informal' (Jones, 2012b; Chapters 6, 7 and 9, this issue).

Since late colonial times, these 'informal' settlements grew faster than any other part of the respective cities. These settlements' populace was difficult to control; and, probably more important, unlike the 'formal' centres, which often looked like cities in the motherland, these areas were hardly legible to planners and civil servants. The difference was often cast in the grand binary distinction of the time: the 'old, traditional, African' ways of living and housing

in a more euphemistic perspective as food security for the urban populace (ADB, 2016b, 2; African Center for Economic Transformation, 2017).

were represented by the unordered, spontaneous, poor and unstructured settlements while the well-built 'modern' centre stood for a promising African future (Drakakis-Smith, 2000).

The dichotomy transformed repeatedly and adopted more than once another shape after independence. The most prominent is certainly the opposition of 'formal' vs. 'informal' that, at first sight, still divides most African cities. In the 1970s, the economic anthropologist Keith Hart (1973, 1985) and others⁵ had derived the term 'informal economy' from the enormous cleavage between those who paid taxes and profited from official, legal, waged, regulated employment and its many benefits and the masses who had no official employment and who had to make a living as 'autonomous'—that is, self-employed—workers in the unregulated, often illegal, small-scale spheres of the urban arena. Broadly defined, informality covers all unregistered or officially unobserved economic activities. This definition implies that there is an agency, usually the state, that registers and observes. In the end, the binary distinction juxtaposes state-regulated economic activities to all others that the state is unable or unwilling to control. Because of the—from a Western perspective—'weakness' of most African states, the 'informal sector' is sometimes identified as Africa's most prominent contribution to economic theory (Collier, 1993).⁶

This opposition made Africa's cityscapes legible to planners and development experts. Slums and the infamous *bidonvilles* in French-speaking Africa (Balandier, 1955, 1957) were redefined as 'informal' settlements that were not recognised or addressed by the administration '...as an integral part of the city' (UN-Habitat, 2008, 7). Hence the assumption that informality is directly related to poverty (e.g. Rauch, 1991). Of course, this definition comes with real disadvantages for the people living in these areas, who often account for three fourths of the urban populace. They frequently have no access to public services, no electricity or water supply and only insufficient living areas, and their houses are constructed of inadequate materials and thus easily affected by natural disasters (UN, 2015). No less important is that they often do not have a right to the places and houses where they live. They usually have no title deeds

5 More generally first outlined by W. Arthur Lewis (1955), who coined the term 'shadow economy'. As 'informal economy', the concept was popularised in the 1970s and 1980s (de Soto, 1989). Ilda Lindell (2010a, 2010b) and Rafael La Porta and Andrei Shleifer (2014) provide overviews.

6 Statistics and quantitative data on the informal sector are notoriously unreliable. Estimations for sub-Saharan Africa currently vary between 20–25 per cent for South Africa and Namibia and 50–65 per cent for Nigeria, Benin and Tanzania (Medina et al., 2017). The urban informal economy is usually larger than the national informal economy, in terms of how these relate, proportionally, to the urban and national economy at large.

and in many cities they are regularly expelled whenever the urban council sees a need to do so (Chapter 9, this issue).

From a critical perspective, the facts are obvious. The inhabitants of 'informal' settlements have no right to the city—their city is not theirs (Lefebvre, 1968; Purcell, 2014; on South Asia see Anjaria and McFarlane, 2011). The 'formal–informal' bifurcation thus has immediate relevance for urban governance and, by extension, for any development policy (Chapters 4 and 9, this issue). It creates an administrative reality that no actor, whatever their background and intentions, can ignore. Having no deed for the place where one lives makes one extremely vulnerable to expulsion, which not only implies the loss of one's home but more often than not the loss of all belongings. It is no surprise that most slum dwellers would do almost everything to get their shacks registered as private property—even if their home does not consist of much more than the two or three corrugated iron sheets of the roof and sun-dried mud bricks (Chapter 7, this issue).

If there is a chance to do so, people who construct 'illegally' at the margins of 'formally' recognised areas try to reproduce the patterns that they believe a 'formal' planning of the urban council would have produced. That will, they presume, ease their recognition as a 'formal' settlement at a later date: urban and development planners must learn to work with these areas—regardless of whether they emerged as unregistered or as registered settlements (Roy, 2005). Though entirely illegal from an official point of view, such neighbourhoods may look as if they were constructed by a construction company under government supervision. They often have the same street grid and reproduce housing patterns very similar to those of the officially recognised neighbourhoods next to them. In an act of 'inverse governmentality', they thus breed similar forms of urban housing and governance (Nielsen, 2011). The street vendor, the market, the tiny shops at the street corner, or illicit drinking spots—they all work in the grey zone that such apparently informal neighbourhoods provide and protect.

Unlike the formal–informal divide, which projects the normativity of Western tax- and state administration on African cities,⁷ the grey zone is an open concept. It recognises that neither urban economies and practices nor the roles of the many different actors are fixed. Actors can adopt one or other role according to how they judge a particular situation and what suits them best. They may be tax collectors when meeting a stall owner on the market—and a friend or patron a minute later when they exchange a few words with the

7 To conceive the 'formality' and 'informality' dichotomy as two types of practice (McFarlane, 2012) is a step forward but does not solve the problem as practices may merge as much and as often as the actors change their position in an ongoing interaction.

trader. Living in a grey zone means that that one has to judge and to weigh repeatedly one's interactions with others as people are the institutional infrastructure that one must most often rely on (Simone, 2004b). Only when having engaged in an interaction does the grey give way to colours: the 'formal' and the 'informal' are at best extreme positions on a sliding scale.

Unsurprisingly, the dichotomy of 'formal' vs. 'informal' does not play a decisive role outside the narrower administrative context. Most urban actors do not care whether a particular practice is 'formally' recognised or not. However, that does not mean that there are no rules or that they are living in a chaotic setting. Although development experts perceive the 'informal' sector as 'chaotic' because it is unregulated, that is a big misunderstanding. Unregulated does not mean disordered nor does it necessarily mean confused. Indeed, most people living and working in settings that development experts qualify as 'informal' do have to follow strict rules and regulations. The difference is that these rules are neither written nor necessarily registered and enforced by the city and its administration. They emerge out of the myriad of interactions that ordinary urban dwellers engage in day in, day out. They grow out of the everyday politics of urban governance.

Notwithstanding its opaqueness, the urban grey zone can be a strictly regulated space. The grey zone thus sets itself apart from the usual understanding of the 'informal' sector as an unregulated market. The street vendors in front of a church, mosque or supermarket usually have to respect invisible limits. They must not sell things that other vendors offer next to them—or that the supermarket sells—and they must not intrude into the territory of neighbouring vendors who sell the same stuff. More often than not, they also pay 'taxes'—that is, a daily fee collected by the 'owner of the place'. Often, street vendors do not know why a particular person claims to be the 'owner' of the place—but they know that the man gets angry if he does not get the daily fee. It may be small and insignificant for a shop owner—but it may be very high for vendors with no capital and no other income than the little that they sell over the day. In addition, they sometimes have to pay twice: first to the 'informal' owner and second to the 'formal' tax collector of the urban council. Living in the grey zone is not easy. 'One has to struggle to survive', many of these people say. Rules in the 'informal' sector can be much stricter than the 'formal' rules of the urban council—and may extend right into the heart of global cities such as New York (Touré, 1985; Stoller, 1996; in general Brown, 2006; Bhowmik, 2010).

Does it really make sense to divide urban economies into 'formal' and 'informal' sectors? Or a city's neighbourhoods into 'formal' and 'informal' ones? To characterise African cities as 'informal' cities? In addition to what we have already outlined, other processes also put the 'formal–informal' divide into

question. The grey zones may become dominant when an institution disintegrates or when it loses interest in a particular area. Such transformations were sometimes labelled as ‘re-informalisation’ (Myers, 2010, 2011, 89–97). Very much as the processes of inverse governmentality, they may lead to partial formalisation—that is, to hybrid forms where ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ rules coexist or overlap (Oldfield, 2002). But that is not the main characteristic of the urban grey zone. ‘Informal’ as well as ‘formal’ practices are indistinguishable as long as the actors do not specify them as such—or, to use a metaphor, when they, through their practice, morph the grey into clearer, legible colours.

Using conventional development language thus leads to contradictory statements: ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ often merge in everyday life. Myriad forms of ‘informal’ practices exist within the ‘formal’ economy. At the same time, the activities in the ‘formal’ sector very much depend on those in the ‘informal’ one (Chapter 3, this issue). Not only the urban poor make a living from the ‘informal’ sector; better-off urbanites also profit from unregulated forms of production, distribution and service provision, especially since the structural adjustment reforms imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Murray and Myers, 2006, 13–15). The emerging urban middle class and its interaction with local state employees and politicians (for India see Fernandes and Heller, 2006; Baud, 2015) is of increasing importance to development cooperation—though the highly loaded term ‘class’ may not apply in Marxist terms. Again, empirical research is lacking, and much still needs to be clarified. The contribution of Chapter 3 of this issue is an important step towards such a clarification.

Obviously, it is impossible to draw a clear line between the ‘informal’ and the ‘formal’ in African cities (Pieterse and Simone, 2013). It depends on the actors and the situation whether a particular practice may fall under the Western rubric of ‘formal’ and state governed or ‘informal’ and regulated by others, but it is also possible—and often much more likely—that it merges the two. So, if we have to learn what the elephant is all about, we have to learn it from the actors.

If the distinction of ‘formal’ versus ‘informal’ is flawed, what does that mean for development cooperation? The many panels on ‘informality’ and urbanity in Africa at the European Conference on African Studies 2017 show that the large and ongoing scholarly debates about the meaning and the consequences of ‘informality’ and development cooperation have not ended. Our notion of the grey zone meets to some extent Oren Yiftachel’s (2009b) concept of ‘gray space’ in the context of Bedouin Arabs’ struggles in Israel and Palestine. According to Yiftachel, ‘gray spacing’ is ‘the practice of indefinitely positioning populations between the “lightness” of legality, safety and full membership,

and the “darkness” of eviction, destruction and death’ (2009a, 247). His example shows that the actors not only have to deal with economic constraints and attempts to extract fees or taxes from them—they are deeply entangled in urban politics. Our concept of the urban grey zone takes this understanding a step further. We take the grey zone as an opaque space that the actors not only confront but through their daily social practice incrementally morph into a colourful cityscape. By positioning themselves in interactions with other urbanites, they create the colours that allow them to perceive the city as a life-world of their own agency.

Development agencies have to rethink conventional concepts that their interventions build on—and their own position in the social and political urban space. Any intervention in such a context is inevitably a political statement. There is no purely ‘technical assistance’ or ‘technical cooperation’, as the name of some big development agencies suggests. The materiality of the infrastructure is not a technical instrument only. The segregated colonial city with its *cordons sanitaires* that separated the white urban centre from the periphery and the ‘indigenous’ population is only the most obvious case in point (Eckert, 2002, 2011). The congestion between the city centre and a suburban neighbourhood today may have a similar effect. On the one hand, not to construct a street means to seal the neighbourhood off from the city as a political space, but it also fosters the emergence of an autonomous suburban social and political space where new actors may emerge (Chapter 11, this issue). On the other hand, constructing a four-lane expressway that cuts the neighbourhood into two also has a double-sided effect. Besides inhibiting the formation of a cohesive community, it may easily bring local actors into the city centre, where they may articulate their political claims in unexpected ways, often to the dislike of those in power (Merrifield, 2013; Diouf and Fredericks, 2014; Chapter 8, this issue).

Cityscapes mirror urban politics (e.g. Habitat International 2015 on urban megaprojects). African cities as ‘sites of assemblages and centrality, territorialisation and connectedness’ (Robinson, 2013, 1) are characterised by stark contrasts. Today, many African cityscapes display an ‘additive’ and ‘poly-nucleated’ urbanism (Brenner and Schmid, 2011, 2015): one neighbourhood after the other is added—but they often remain disconnected, rather focused on themselves. Only a few major axes run through the endlessly urbanised landscape, congested throughout the entire day and much of the night. Moving from one neighbourhood to the other is often extremely time consuming and especially challenging for vulnerable people such as disabled or old persons (UN, 2015). There is no public transport system except tardy minibuses that cannot advance because of traffic and because people enter and exit the buses every few hundred metres—eventually congesting the street as much as private cars do.

Hence, many tiny shops and street vendors persist for all those who cannot afford a car to drive to the main market or the next mall. Africa's urbanites are actors and subjects of continuous social, political and economic transformations and actively situate themselves in their cities as economic, social and political spaces. To move or not to move, to walk or to take a minibus ride is not only a pragmatic judgment of the current situation, it is also an act of articulating one's claims to the city as a social and political space.

Development policies are neither neutral tools nor instruments of social engineering—and neither are remittances, which have become the largest flow of foreign investment in many African countries (Gupta et al., 2009; Nyamongo et al., 2012).⁸ They are an important part of and play a multifaceted role in urban politics. Therefore, they require a thorough knowledge of the inhabitants and how they act and articulate their claims to the city. That makes urban development a highly intricate venture that goes far beyond planning exercises. Continuous and critical reflection on the all too often mixed impacts of development policies is an imperative to bring urban change in a good way. The contributions to this issue address this conundrum—they aim to provide insights into the urban life-worlds that African urbanites create, and ask how that local, urban knowledge relates to three themes in African urbanism; urban governance; planning, politics and the urban grey zone; and the urban-rural continuum.

2 The Contributions to This Thematic Issue

The contributions to this issue approach African cities from cross-cutting and interdisciplinary perspectives. They avoid normative, preconceived categories and look at African cities as they are experienced and lived by actors on the continent. We understand urbanity as a social practice of urban dwellers who, through their interactions, create encounters and distancing in urban social spaces (Förster, 2013). They thus set the frame for urban governance, politics, planning, economics and not least how African cities relate to their outer, rural conurbation area. We structure the chapters around the themes mentioned above.

2.1 *Urban Governance*

Among the many problems that cities are facing in Africa, governance is a key issue. 'Policies do not occur in a vacuum', as the World Development Report

⁸ Here, the flow of remittances within and between African countries should not be neglected (Sander and Maimbo, 2005).

aply notes. They are the outcome of complex political and social settings within ever changing rules that are influenced by various actors (World Bank, 2017, 29). As municipalities are, with few exceptions, financially and institutionally weaker than their counterparts in the global North, they often cannot plan and order urban space as urban administrations would do elsewhere. They have to engage in novel forms of governance that are not based on Western models and their history. Research on urban governance in Africa thus has turned into a fascinating field that calls for new concepts and urban theories to analyse the entanglement of the many actors that engage in and deal with cities and the urban. The author of Chapter 2 looks at different levels and scales of urban governance in Africa. Having been part of international, regional and national bodies responsible for drafting new policies, he is intimately familiar with urban agendas in numerous African cities and analyses how they relate to global policy frameworks—namely, the New Urban Agenda adopted by the United Nations at Habitat III, 2016. The author's analyses also address the local level, including Khayelitsha, a suburb and former township of Cape Town, South Africa. As director of the African Centre for Cities, also domiciled in Cape Town, he has a deep insight into urban policies and the formation of urban governance in other parts of the continent. The author proposes a radical change in the future political and institutional landscape: territorial, macroeconomic and infrastructure investment regimes should be thought of as one. In his contribution, he outlines how this new landscape could—and should—look and what conditions need to be fulfilled to extend such multi-scalar politics in Africa.

The author of Chapter 3 adopts another, complementary perspective on urban governance in Africa. He mainly looks at Kisumu in Kenya as an example of the urban middle ground—the many ordinary, medium-sized cities on the continent that are neither sprawling megacities nor country capitals with their extraordinary responsibilities and corresponding budgets. The author's analytical lens focuses on three basic fields of governance: land use management, the provision of basic services, and mobility. His basic findings are obvious: the World Bank's concept of good governance, largely based on normative Western understandings of the Westphalian state as an institution of superior legitimate power, does and will not work in Africa. One has to recognise, he argues, that neither the state as an institution nor state actors as individuals occupy the same dominant position in African cities as they do in the global North. Therefore, he uses governance mainly as a lens to analyse how decisions are made in African cities and how they are eventually implemented. By juxtaposing a general typology of actors to the three basic themes of governance, the author concludes that there is no alternative to collaborative forms of governance—as messy and conflictual as they often are, they take the deeply

political character of governance into account while government-oriented models will fail to depoliticise governance.

In Chapter 4, the authors examine a practical case of urban governance: the effectiveness of conventional anti-corruption and good-governance policies in Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania, East Africa. As many state actors and also development agencies still make use of the formal–informal dichotomy, the authors look at how such basic convictions shape the perception of corruption and how corruption is related to informal practices blurring its presence in the daily lives of the populace. They identify three such practices: a) co-optation as the recruitment into social networks where corruption is sustained, b) control as a practice of normalising and securing the persistence of corruption by disciplining those who might deviate from corrupt patterns of behaviour, and c) camouflage as a way of obscuring where corruption actually plays a role in the administration and its subordinate bodies. Corruption sustains, the authors conclude, a moral economy that, on its part, also legitimises these practices. As a normalised form of interaction, corruption depends on political regimes that build on clientelist networks. To claim that corruption is ‘endemic’—as some politicians repeatedly do—is no more than a shortcut. Bypassing a thorough empirical analysis, it labels corruption as a disease for which no cure exists. The authors show that such analyses are possible and need to be done.

Chapter 5 addresses one of the SDG 11 targets, namely the provision of inclusive, green and public spaces (UN, 2015). The author zooms in on a failure of collaborative governance and thus counterbalances to some degree the more general statements of the preceding contributions. The author asks why the co-management of parks in Johannesburg, South Africa, does not work in the post-apartheid era. Since the budget allocated to such sites by the city council is limited, many neighbourhoods in middle-class areas engage in a sort of community management of already existing parks. Opposing agendas are fostered by the deep mistrust between certain actors, in particular the mainly white middle classes and the City Park authorities dominated by black South Africans. This opposition provokes the emergence of political articulations and creates a discursive space where the voices of other actors, in particular those of lower-income communities are often not heard. This deeply conflictual, political configuration makes the management of the parks extremely complex and eventually marginalises other, private actors and their initiatives.

2.2 *Planning, Urban Politics and the Urban Grey Zone*

The second section of this special issue looks at planning, urban politics and the urban grey zone, which all feed into what is usually known as the ‘informality’ of urbanisation in Africa. Rapid urbanisation processes are highly sensitive

issues for the actors involved. Politicians, planners, local entrepreneurs, development experts as well as ordinary urbanites have different and often contesting visions for their city. The African city is characterised by stark contrasts within itself. Thus, the same city looks very different from one neighbourhood to the next. While glittering skyscrapers might dominate the central business districts where governmental buildings are located and where the country's financial centre lies, many areas of the city's grey zone are marked by modest houses and insufficient, decaying infrastructure. These are the areas where upgrading and transformation processes are frequent—and where development policies are most relevant, as the following chapters demonstrate.

Chapter 6 provides an overview of urbanisation in Africa and relates it to general demographic trends on the continent and elsewhere. The prospects of an extremely rapidly growing urban population point at future challenges of development cooperation and, indeed, at what these changes in Europe's global neighbourhood will mean for the aging population of the global North. The author does not come up with easy answers; he just points at the dimensions of the long-term tendencies. It is clear that, already today, the image of Africa as a rural continent no longer reflects realities on the continent. The author then analyses the wide variety of cities in Africa and introduces the Sustainable Cities Initiatives in Africa that aim at answering the challenges of urbanisation, focusing particularly on the environment, land use, public transport, water and sanitation as the most burning issues in Africa's exploding megacities. He shows that regional and international networks of cities may lead to a more sustainable development of African cities, but it is also clear that some cities and urban agglomerations on the continent are not visible in these networks—indicating the importance of expanding and strengthening these networks. The same holds true for thorough, empirically grounded research on urbanisation in Africa, which is done by only a few institutions on the continent.

Chapter 7 takes a close look at how inhabitants who live at the fringes of Namibia's capital Windhoek make claims in the context of upgrading policies that have been ongoing for over 15 years. The author demonstrates that while some campaigning and sporadic movements have received wider attention, most forms of claim-making over land, services and housing emerge from the residents' everyday experiences. The contribution nicely illustrates the diversity of the settlements and actors involved as well as the blurred boundaries between tolerated and non-tolerated practices, licit and illicit procedures, and between formality and informality more generally. The author concludes that contrary to all too many other, more autocratic settings, the relationship between state representatives and the poor inhabitants in Namibia is not marked by opposition but by mutual dependency, which leads to co-optation and collusion.

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, is an example of a rapidly growing city in an authoritarian development state. In Chapter 8, the author analyses the formation of physical and social spaces and how these processes relate to social and economic differentiation. The formation of such spaces is key to understanding the range of urbanisation in Africa. In practical terms, this may mean looking more attentively at the impact that, for instance, the construction of streets and other infrastructure has on how the urban populace can dwell, make a living and articulate their interests. In particular, large streets with separate lanes and heavy traffic may affect the ways urbanites as social actors can situate themselves in the city. They can prevent, as the author writes, 'spatial dialogics' and dialogic articulations that would sustain the city as a collective social space. An approach that looks more carefully at how common ground emerges in the formation of urban social spaces would no longer follow the usual, linear model of development to solve specific economic, environmental or social problems. It would rather foster a circular approach—a continuous engagement with different concepts and ideas as they are articulated by the people in different spaces in the city.

In Chapter 9, the authors are also interested in the impacts of major spatial transformations that significantly influence the everyday lives of ordinary urbanites. The authors analyse decongestion policies applied in Accra, Ghana, over the last decades to remove unwanted urban dwellers and activities within the city centre. The municipality argued that the policies were aimed at beautifying the city, easing traffic flows, reducing crime and preventing the regular flooding of large areas. In their contribution, the authors analyse the effects of these policies with regard to inclusiveness, sustainable development and the promotion of the right to the city more generally.

2.3 *The Urban-Rural Continuum*

The last section in this special issue focuses on the rural–urban continuum. In discursive formations of many African urbanites, a huge discrepancy between urban and rural modes of living and lifestyles is noticeable. While the city is related to 'modern' ways of life, the village is considered the representation of 'traditional' values. However, such a clear-cut binary distinction between the two is utterly impossible: the rural and the urban are interlinked in manifold ways. The footprints of the city are visible in rural areas—very much as rural ways of living shape urban areas. One such example is urban agriculture, which replenishes the food basket of many a household in urban Africa. As cities expand, they extend more and more into the surrounding rural area, adding to the expansion of what can be labelled the city's outskirts, the city's fringes, suburbs, peri-urban areas or peripheral neighbourhoods. Consequently, it is

often not clear where a city begins and where it ends. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift (2002, 1) go as far as to claim that '[w]e can no longer even agree on what counts as a city... The city is everywhere and in everything'.

In Chapter 10, the author foregrounds exactly such urbanisation processes, analysing former villages that have merged with the city. The author critically distances himself from research that analyses urban phenomena in the global South from a 'Western' perspective as done for example by the Globalization and World Cities (GAWC) research network or the work informed by Lefebvre's idea of planetary urbanisation. In contrast, he utilises urban theory from the global South for the global South, applying Chinese concepts to explain urban transformations in Senegal and Zanzibar. When analysing villages swallowed up by the cities in the Pearl River Delta, Chinese urbanists distinguish three forms: villages in the city, villages on the edge and villages in the suburbs. The author utilises these three concepts as lenses to explain what has recently been happening in the West District of Zanzibar and Dakar's satellite city of Pikine. The author's comparison is a convincing example of how African cities can be thought through the urban elsewhere (Robinson, 2016).

In Chapter 11, the author zooms in on this same city—Pikine. He examines the various ways through which young men live and shape their city and vice versa. Even though Pikine lacks basic infrastructure and is characterised by a high degree of urban poverty, its young urbanites take pride in being from this place. Through the explanation of specific expressions young men frequently use in the vernacular language, the author demonstrates how they situationally adapt to the daily challenges they face. Male youth does this by, among other practices, switching between different identities and appearances and by applying specific coping strategies. They typically characterise themselves as being smart, having stamina and making the best of every situation thanks to their improvisational capacities. Like this, young men are able to make a living and get by in the challenging everyday life-worlds of urban Africa.

The author of Chapter 12 is also interested in urban milieus, this time in East Africa. More specifically, he applies the *distinctiveness of cities*-concept developed by German sociologists to examine the particularities of a growing segment in almost all African cities, namely the middle-income strata. In his study, the author identifies six different, but partly overlapping milieus in Nairobi and explains their connections to rural areas: the Neo-Traditionals, the Social Climbers, the Cosmopolitan-Liberals, the Christian Religious and the Young Professionals. The last two are analysed in more detail. The Christian Religious are active church members and strictly follow religious rules. At the same time, they are highly ambitious and convinced that they will—thanks to spiritual support—socially advance. For Young Professionals, in contrast,

conspicuous consumption and individual lifestyles are essential. These milieus, so the author argues, are bound to their city in particular ways just as, vice versa, the different cities shape the lifestyles of these milieus.

In Chapter 13, the author is also interested in rural–urban transformations but approaches them through mining ‘boomtowns’ in the conflict-ridden area of the Kivu provinces, Democratic Republic of Congo. In an ethnographically rich description, the author demonstrates how three emerging mining towns have become important political, economic and social resources for the actors involved. These ‘boomtowns’ offer fascinating lenses with which to explore how different political, economic, humanitarian, civil and military actors (violently) struggle for power, authority and control. The author argues that due to their urban character and the natural resources they contain, emerging ‘boomtowns’ have intensified the already existing conflict dynamics in the Kivu provinces.

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